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SUBJECT: PASSING THE TORCH: MONTILLA REPLACES MARAGALL AS PRESIDENT
OF THE GENERALITAT AND A NEW ERA BEGINS

11. (SBU) In an emotional and dramatic November 28 ceremony, Jose Montilla received the medal signifying his position as President from out-going President Pascal Maragall and was formally decreed as the 128th President of the Generalitat, the high seat of Catalan government. As his parents looked on, Montilla pronounced himself "the most humble servant of the Catalan people." Later, as he introduced his new government, it became clear there would be some continuity, but also a significant shuffling of responsibilities - further admission that this government would work hard not to repeat the mistakes of the one it was replacing. In remarks to the press, the new president repeated his vow to focus on social issues, and declared that his government would act with prudence and speak with one voice - yet another reflection of the weaknesses of the past government, which was reportedly rife with in-fighting between the three parties that made up the coalition (Tripartit). Visibly emotional, Maragall fondly recalled his time in public service and wished the in-coming government well. Significantly, he noted that Montilla's heritage did not make Catalonia "less Catalan", but rather confirmed that "our new homeland is Europe," and later, "our new path is the Mediterranean."

A New Era Begins~

12. (SBU) Montilla, thus, becomes the first President of Catalonia since the post-Franco era not to have been born in Catalonia - he was born near Cordoba - a fact focused on by the media. Opinions appear to fall into two broad categories on this issue: many believe Montilla's "foreign" roots are a sign of growing social maturity in the region. Others are scarcely able to hide their discomfort with the fact that an "outsider" has taken over. (Note: Montilla, who comes from very humble beginnings, moved to Catalonia as a child in 1971. End note.) Heritage aside, a major reason Montilla's ascent to the presidency stands out is the striking difference in demeanor from that man he is replacing. Montilla quickly named his new team - a mixture of carryovers from the previous government and some new faces - and projected a sense of unity, something the out-going government reportedly failed to do. Few doubt Montilla's seriousness and work ethic, but clearly many are withholding judgment on his ability to keep vice president Josep Carod Rovira (Republican Left) and Interior Counselor Joan Saura (Green) in line.

13. (SBU) If body language is any indication, Montilla will not be able to count on a "honeymoon" period as he takes the helm. Convergence and Union (CiU) President Artur Mas, who sat stonily eyeing Montilla's investiture, later dismissed the new government as the same as the old one, and predicted it would likely be just as (un)successful, in remarks to the press.

And Another Ends

14. (SBU) Pascal Maragall's Catalan roots run deep and his shadow will loom large over Montilla's presidency just as Jordi Pujol's shadow continues even today. Maragall is the grandson of a famous poet of the region, and his brother, Ernest Maragall, will continue the family tradition of public service as Counselor for Education and also one of President Montilla's closest advisors. Maragall's emotional farewell speech recalled his years as mayor (when he successfully brought the 1992 Olympics to Barcelona) and president (where he oversaw the growing economic and political strength of the region.) He also fondly made note of his close relationship with the United States.

15. (SBU) Comment: While still early days, our sense is Montilla will have very little time to whip the reconstituted Tripartit into shape and show positive results. The media are already on the alert for any signs of discord. Naming the prickly Carod-Rovira vice president and giving him the external affairs portfolio (nominally in charge of implementing the statute (Estatut) governing relations between Catalonia and Madrid) will either prove to be a stroke of genius or a big mistake. Carod left Maragall's government over the Estatut negotiations, but has recently expressed some regret over that decision. Another test has already begun in the area of public security. In a surprise move, the head of the Mossos d'Escuadra (Catalonia's regional police force), Joan Unio, announced his resignation effective immediately before Green party president Saura was named Interior Counselor. Unio was an extremely helpful Consulate General contact. There is speculation that Unio, who appeared to have a good relationship with the previous Interior head, did not think he could work as effectively with the new team. On the record, according to the Mossos website, Unio is leaving to pursue other opportunities in the private sector. No word yet on a replacement. End Comment.

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